

## Towards a Diagnosis of the Effects of Teenage Subculture on IQ

by James R. Flynn ♦ May 28, 2009

*Several lines of analysis suggest that peer subculture, at least among Britons and US blacks, affects IQ test performance. By the teenage years, it is so potent as to swamp family and school. For example, in Britain, data for 1980 to 2008 show that the teenage years are exceptional in that contemporary youth have made no IQ gains over time, even though younger schoolchildren and adults have made significant gains. In America, the teenage years show black IQ steadily losing ground on white IQ. Although the role of black teenage subculture is in dispute, comparative data from Germany, where black subculture was absent, showed IQ parity between the races.*

Evidence has begun to accumulate that teenage subculture may play a negative role in cognitive development. That hypothesis has emerged in my own research when analyzing British gains on Raven's Progressive Matrices, and analyzing the causes of the black/white IQ gap in America.

### *The British Raven's data*

Raven's Progressive Matrices is a test of fluid intelligence. Its items each present a matrices design with a part missing, and you must identify the missing part from the alternatives pictured. That means looking for the piece that will give coherent sequences vertically, horizontally, and diagonally, rather than a piece that gives an arbitrary sequence. It is a good test of the ability to use logic to deal with symbols that are abstract in the sense that they refer to no real-world object. The British data cover two periods, approximately 1943 to 1980 and 1980 to 2008.

In the later period, gains by age present a peculiar pattern. From ages 5 to 8, the average rate of gain is robust around a mean of 0.435 points per year. But then, the rate steadily declines from 0.335 at age 9 down to small losses at ages 14-15 (Flynn, 2009, Table 4). Michael Shayer has found the same pattern for the teenage years on mental tests derived from the developmental theories of the great French psychologist, Jean Piaget (Shayer et al., 2007; Shayer, in press). Teenagers also suffer from comparison to the large gains on Raven's by British adults in the period of 1942 to 1992, although one must be guarded as to whether these have continued to the present day (Flynn, 1998, Figure 3). The results pose the possibility that the cognitive demands of teenage subculture have been stagnant over the last 30 years.

I have compared Raven's gains over the top and bottom halves of the IQ curve on the assumption that more of the upper 50 percent in SES (socio-economic status) will be represented in the top half, and more of the lower 50 percent in the bottom half. In the earlier period of 1943 to 1980, the upper classes have larger gains than the lower classes before the age of nine and then do worse thereafter. A speculation: perhaps, smaller families and new parenting practices hit the upper classes earlier, favoring their children when young; but this advantage faded away as the leveler of school began to bite. In the later period, gains were relatively equal over the top and bottom halves of the curve at ages 5 to 8 giving way to a much greater gain over the bottom half at age 9 and thereafter. Perhaps, between 1980 and 2008, the peer culture of upper-class pre-adolescents and adolescents stagnated in a way that was not so severe for the lower classes.

In other words, upper-class teenage culture enjoyed an advantage over lower-class teenage culture in 1980 that had been much eroded by 2008. Could this be pop culture "corrupting" lower class youth earlier than it did upper class youth?

Setting aside class, the data suggest parenting and school became much more cognitively challenging between 1980 and 2008 but peer subculture was no more cognitively enriched in 2008 than it was in 1980. That subculture began to swamp family and school at age 9, gained in momentum at ages 10-11, and was dominant by ages 12-15. Note that teenage culture did not get worse over time; it merely meant that teenagers just made no cognitive progress over time. Fortunately, always assuming that adult gains held up during this period, Britons broke out of that subculture as they entered university and the world of work.

### *Blacks lose ground on whites with age*

According to the latest data, at the age of 4, black children are only 4.6 IQ points below white children (Flynn, 2008, Figure 2). By the age of 18, black youths are 13 points below whites. This suggests that the environment of black youths is less cognitively demanding than that of white youths and some have posited that peer culture plays an important role.



Cook and Ludwig (1998) give survey data that suggest that black youths are at least as pro-education as whites. Sowell (1972; 1975; 2000, p. 222) provides anecdotal evidence drawn from his life as a black student and black educator. He believes that blacks respect education in the abstract but do not appreciate the need for persistence, uninterrupted work, and an atmosphere conducive to intellectual interests. Rather, families and peers reinforce achievements with immediate appeal, athletic triumphs, and musical promise more than those that require self-denial or long-range planning. He recounts sadly how often he has sat in a university library and has seen black students as the last to arrive, the slowest to get down to work, the most easily distracted, and the first to leave.

The Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson (2006) may reconcile these two views. He argues that black males do not despise education and are aware of the benefits it brings, but that their youth culture offers rewards that they cannot resist. Dressing sharply, hanging out, sexual conquests, party drugs, and hip-hop music and culture are powerfully attractive, and the admiration they get from both black and white peers bolsters self-esteem. White teenagers find imitating the postures of this culture attractive but they do not live it. Rather it is a hobby, something they set aside every time they think of the looming presence of the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) that will determine their fate.

Perhaps survey data can be supplemented with something that helps us penetrate to the reality of black youth culture (cameras that record what actually goes on during the hours of homework reported?). For now, I will add my own impressions for what they are worth. It seems to me that a subculture that legislates atypical speech and appears to put activities like athletics ahead of cognitively demanding leisure activities has to be a negative influence.

It is worth noting that in post-war Germany, the offspring of black-American servicemen and white-American servicemen (with German women) had virtually the same average IQs. There was of course no distinctively black subculture in Germany. The half-black children were simply Germans with a darker skin.

#### *Task for the sociologists*

I am no sociologist and must leave the necessary research to others. But once again, analysis of IQ trends over time reveals that they do not just chart scores on IQ tests. They provide a cognitive history that forces us to dig deep into how society has evolved over time, that is, how its cognitive priorities shift from generation to generation and group to group.

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